

20 October 1980

MEMORANDUMAcademic Views of IranKey Points

The State Department hosted a seminar on 10 October featuring Professors [redacted]

[redacted] believes:

- A military coup is most likely after Khomeini's death. The junta will not attack the religious community and would be aggressively nationalist. The exiles have little chance; their contempt for the masses is evident in their broadcasts.
- If no unified leadership emerges and the country begins to disintegrate, the Mujahedin is most likely to succeed because of its appeal to the people. The Tudeh's pro-Soviet image limits its chances, but it might seize power in some areas.
- Severe economic hardships this winter could lead the people to turn against Khomeini if they believe they have no hope for betterment.

[redacted] concentrated on the impact of Shiism on politics.

- The clerics, who are not very well educated or politically skilled, want an economy not dependent on Western technology and imports and stress self-sufficiency and less urbanization.

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[] spoke on the Iranian psyche and its impact on foreign policy.

-- There was a rapid change in popular attitudes towards the US during the revolution. A substantial reservoir of good will remains and might be tapped if the US makes some sort of dramatic gesture. The war gives us an opportunity.

-- Much of Khomeini's charisma is based on the fact that he is acting out the cultural theme of "purity"; if others go too far in attempting compromise, he cuts them off. [] says Khomeini last January told him that once the effectiveness of the hostage-taking wore off the politicians could take care of the haggling needed to free them. The Iranians, however, might look for some other way to shock the US.)

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-- The Iranians have a substantial capacity to endure deprivation. Material shortages reinforce their tendency to be uncompromising.

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[] who specializes in foreign affairs, believes the war will further polarize and radicalize politics. Iraq attacked because it perceived a strengthening of the Khomeini regime and an end of the hostage crisis.

All four of these observers think the Iranians during a protracted war would look to the USSR rather than the US for aid.

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[] on Internal Politics

Khomeini has personally defined the current Iranian society more than most other charismatic leaders. But this is an transitory phenomenon and the post-Khomeini era will be very different. The secular period in Iran was long and strong, and it cannot be easily blotted out, but the post-Khomeini era will not be a copy of the Shah's era either.

Khomeini is a bad political tactician. He has recklessly cut off groups of willing supporters in the name of Islamic and revolutionary purity. His support was reduced to a core of enthusiasts before the war with Iraq. Support from this

core will continue as long as it is comfortable with his ideology, but could fade quickly in the face of perceived failure of the regime spokesmen.

There are several possible models for future political developments in Iran:

- A successor regime may emerge from the present Bani-Sadr/Rajai/Rafsanjani/Beheshti melange. Perhaps if Khomeini became ill and withdrew, the IRP could emerge as a factionalized group, have its power struggle, and develop a coherent ideology. Darioush Forouhar might also emerge as a power-- more than other old time political leaders, he realizes that leaders must reach the secular "attentives" and the masses.
- Before the Iran-Iraq conflict erupted, Cottam thought that Iranian "disintegration" was the most likely post-Khomeini scenario, but now he thinks a military coup is more likely. He says the Iranian leaders realize they must have a professional elite military. The regime may develop the "heroes" whose emergence Khomeini has so far prevented. Perhaps Bani-Sadr will be one of them, but to do so he must exploit the nationalist theme and Khomeini and other fundamentalists may oppose him.
- If a military junta emerges, it will be one that understands that the religious masses must be won over and that the religious community cannot be attacked head on as the exiles have been doing on their clandestine radios. The military would use religious symbols but privately tell the clergy that they will play only a secondary role. The clergy without Khomeini would quickly fall into line.
- The exiles have little chance. Their appeals through their radio broadcasts have reached the secular elite but not the masses. They contain insulting, sometimes obscene attacks on Khomeini and other mullahs.
- Disintegration/anarchy would result if, with the passing of Khomeini, no unified leadership is able to emerge, the people are suffering hardships

which they consider intolerable, and an armed struggle over the succession occurs. [] rates the Mujahedin most likely to succeed in this scenario because they have the ability to rally the support of the people and because of the personal charisma of their leader Rajavi. He puts the Fedayeen next. He rates the Tudeh third and says its pro-Soviet image is an albatross, but the party could seize power in some areas and ask for Soviet support.

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During the question and answer period, [] noted that we haven't seen the full range of clerical political thought and activity because they are so sensitive to staying in step with Khomeini. Almost all of them are vulnerable to exposure for various degrees of cooperation with SAVAK in the past. Beheshti is especially vulnerable on this point. Rafsanjani seems not to be; rumors about him focus on corruption, which is more or less acceptable to Iranians. [] thinks he can perceive a sense of personal confidence in Rafsanjani's remarks that contrast with the fear or insecurity he sees in remarks of other clerics. He says that Rafsanjani, like Khalkhali, is willing to "make remarks that could get him in trouble," but adds that people seem very much afraid of Rafsanjani.

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If the people feel enough distress, Khomeini's demise will come through the collapse of his charisma. In this regard, heating, food, funds for unemployment compensation and other subsidies this winter will be very important.

We will see US conspiracy theories for a long time. These can fade only as a long string of dire predictions fail to materialize. Khomeini's successors will believe we would like to sabotage them, but will probably try for some sort of ties with us. Much will depend on what the USSR is doing vis a vis Iran and what the US is doing with the Arabs. The USSR is trying to appeal to Iran and a successor regime could turn to it.

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[] thinks that under a successor regime anger at the Arabs will continue for a long time. The war has brought nationalism rather than pan-Islamism to the fore in Iran. A military junta would not want to "export the revolution" ideologically as has the Khomeini regime, but it might take an aggressive "nationistic" attitude in the Gulf.

25X1 In response to a question asking if economic distress would turn people against the inept Khomeini regime, [] said the image of a better future is important. If the people see no hope of betterment, they will not tolerate current distress. They could turn against the regime if this is a hard winter. [] agreed that the people can take a lot, but added that in the revolutionary period they had the hope of betterment after they ousted the Shah.

25X1 Professor [] said he has been surprised to discover that everyday Iranians perceived Governor Reagan as more of a threat to Iran than President Carter. He added that Iranians might have reacted positively to an administration led by Senator Kennedy out of nostalgia for his brother.

25X1 [] on the Impact of Shiism

The tenets of 12er Shiism, the main sect in Iran, have varied over time and generalizations are difficult to make. The concept of a top ayatollah began in the mid-19th century, but there have been a number of periods--as recently as 1961-78--when there was no top ayatollah. There are a large number of Shias who don't accept Khomeini as the leading ayatollah. There is no regularized procedure for choosing the leading ayatollah.

An important innovation by Khomeini is that the top ayatollah should play a leading political role. The last top ayatollah, Borujerdi, only issued one political fatwa--against land reform in the 1950s. In the past the term "political mullah" has been one of derision for other clerics and the people. Another Khomeini innovation is that a republic is more Islamic than a monarchy.

The traditional ties of Shias to the bazaar and the location of their top leaders at shrines outside Iran gave 12er clerics more power and safety than Sunnis had in other Muslim countries. They were willing to accept the liberal 1906-7 Iranian constitution in part because they didn't know how their power would be weakened by the secularization of the schools, courts and charitable contributions. In 1941 to 53, they regained some power, but lost it again under the last Shah.

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[] "hesitates" to say that Khomeini and his entourage are basically anti-modernization. They oppose the rapid, large-scale, secular modernization that requires a massive foreign influence and presence as well as a large shift of the population from the traditional countryside to the secularized, Westernized cities. They oppose dependence on foreign imports rather than indigenous skills and products. They opposed the Shah's massive armament program that took resources from the people.

The clerics and traditional folk were threatened by the Westernized upper and middle classes who seemed to hoard the benefits of development and become increasingly corrupt. Unskilled migrants to the cities became resentful and their traditional values were reinforced.

The Shah monopolized the concept of nationalism so to show their opposition, the people had only religion as a focus. The Shah was trying to undermine the influence of religion on the people. The concept of an Islamic Government was not clear in the national memory, so the clergy could use it easily as panacea for all of Iran's problems.

People now are generally disappointed by the revolution because expectations are always too high. Almost everyone was complaining before the war began, but that didn't mean they were ready to oust Khomeini.

Any secular leader who emerges will be able to draw on a deep well of popular and clerical support for a less political role for the clergy. The clergy would settle for implementation of the clause in the 1906-7 constitution that provided a committee of five senior clerics to review all legislation for compatibility with Muslim precepts.

We haven't heard much from the ayatollahs who disagree with Khomeini because they are scared or under house arrest. They also have a real investment in clerical consensus and don't want disagreements made public. Although 12er Shiism allows for different interpretations by ayatollahs, they may also be concerned that a serious split in the sect could occur.

There may have been a general decline in political skills of the clerics after the Shahs secularized the schools, courts, and charity administrations. In the past the most

capable youths pursued religious vocations, but a trend developed under the Shahs in which they would receive a secular education in Iran or abroad and the "second class" students would go to religious schools.

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on the Iranian Psyche

"Discontinuities" are important in Iranian relationships. An Iranian acquaintance may suddenly begin treating you as a close friend or as an enemy. Iranians find it easier to reconcile disagreements rapidly than gradually.

There was a rapid change in popular attitudes during and after the Islamic revolution. Iranians literally could not remember their past positive attitudes toward the US, for example.

One of Khomeini's appeals to the people was the opportunity he seemed to offer to participate in a society in which it would not be necessary to make moral compromises with the government. The Iranians felt corrupted by their necessary participation in the system created under the Shah even though they derived benefits from it. The Iranians retain a deep "nostalgia" for the kind of pure "total commitment" they associate with Khomeini.

Many Iranians are still willing to take risks, to be uncompromising in the face of danger, and to be ready for "martyrdom". This feeling will not give way rapidly in the face of "distress" (material shortages)--it will, in fact, be reinforced. The traditional wisdom is that prosperity corrupts: People begin to make moral compromises when all is going well. They get "compensating satisfaction" from being more absolutist--rather than "realistic"--when things are not going well.

The nation needs some sort of discontinuity in order to change back to a positive attitude toward the US. Bateson disagrees with Professor Cottam's assertion that increments of good experiences with the US will overcome the Iranian conspiracy theory about the US. Behind the politically useful anti-US rhetoric there remains a substantial reservoir of good will that is not responsive to gradualism or legalism, but it can be tapped by US gestures. If the gestures have the necessary "drama", they might set the scene for a rapid shift in attitude. Efforts to improve relations gradually fail because of the Iranian belief that "you can't get there

from here." There has to be a dramatic "discontinuity" to break the log-jam of negative attitudes. The inexperienced, non-professional, "purists" in charge now do not accept the rules of the international game that the powerful nations have set up.

25X1 [] suggested as a possible US "beau geste," an official announcement stating that the frozen Iranian assets in the US could be used to purchase goods to meet humanitarian needs created by the conflict with Iraq. The war situation, she said, has created the opportunity to offer gestures of concern for the Iranian people even if they are not accepted by the Iranian Government.

In response to a question on Khomeini's ability to compromise, Bateson noted that much of his charisma is based on the fact that he seems to be acting out the cultural theme of "purity." But periodically he allows others to try some compromise; if it goes too far, he cuts it off.

25X1 [] believes the Iranians historically have an ambivalent view of the US. They thought the US aided the anti-Mossadeq forces out of ignorance of the true situation; they thought then that the UK was then the real manipulator in Iran. When an elite with a strong negative stereotype of the US came to power, the people took the same view. [] doesn't think Khomeini personally holds that stereotype. He says that Khomeini is idiosyncratic; his views are abstract and intelligent.

25X1 [] believes the Iranians took the hostages to get the US to stop being an oppressor, but it has not changed basic US attitudes toward its own role in the world. Khomeini told Cottam in January 1980 that when the shock and effectiveness of the hostage-taking wore off, Iranian politicians could take care of the haggling needed to free them. The Iranians may later look for another way to shock the US into changing its ways. The importance of gestures, then, is not to change Iranians' attitudes, but to show that the US has changed its attitudes.

[] on the Iran-Iraq War

The current conflict is not without precedent; land boundaries have always been a problem between the two countries. The 1975 Accord provided for the return to Iraq of certain territory, but the Shah did not do so.

Once Iraq abrogated the Accord, it had to enforce its claim to control of the Shatt al Arab and Iran had to resist. This made at least a naval confrontation inevitable. The transnational aspect of the Khomeini regime, as seen from Baghdad, meant that the Accord was no longer viable. Khomeini's Iran is not a "territorial state"; his appeal is to the oppressed everywhere.

Iraq attacked after a momentum had developed in the border clashes. Also, Iran was getting its government in order and might even have been about to resolve the hostage crisis. It was moving toward a stabilization of the regime that Saddam Hussein did not want. Iraq perceived a strengthening not a weakening of the Khomeini regime--and so it attacked.

A question was raised on the willingness of Iran to accept aid from the USSR:

- Professor [] noted it is easier to take from the USSR than from the US, but it is also easier to take kerosene and medical supplies and food than military aid.
- Professor [] believes the Iranians would also take Soviet military aid, but most of their arms are of US manufacture.
- [] thinks the Iranians can temporarily compromise with lesser evils while taking an uncompromising stance against the greater evil/enemy.
- Professor [] Tudeh would gain from a rapprochement with the USSR; Iranian leaders could justify the act as one that saved the revolution.
- Professor [] Khomeini's statement against dealing with the "great satans" (US and USSR) does not distinguish between them. He is predisposed, if the issue is brought to him, to stop cooperation with them.
- But his entourage can get around this if they want to: for example, they are getting aid from North Korea which could be seen as a Soviet backing. But Khomeini's hostility is too strong for a real rapprochement with the USSR.

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